Major letdown for US women: Venus, Stephens out in Melbourne

Bv JOHN PYE Associated Press

MELBOURNE, U.S. Open champion Sloane Stephens was first to go, followed quickly by last year's Australian Öpen runner-up, Venus Williams.

CoCo Vandeweghe went out next as things really started to go crazy for the U.S. women, who eventually lost nine out of 10 firstround matches on a bleak opening day of the Australian Open.

Four months after American women filled all four semifinal spots at the U.S. Open — for the first time in 36 years — three of them are out of contention at the next Grand Slam.

Monday's major letdown was compounded when eighth-seeded Jack Sock and No. 16 John Isner joined the procession of U.S. firstround losers.

In her first match at Rod Laver Arena since a vintage run in 2017 ended in a championship loss to sister Serena, Venus Williams lost her opener to Belinda Bencic 6-3, 7-5 to ensure the title won't stay in

Serena Williams hasn't played a Grand Slam tournament since winning her 23rd major in Australia last year because of her pregnancy and the birth of her first child.

Fifth-seeded Venus was considered a serious contender in her 77th



United States' Venus Williams makes a forehand return to Switzerland's Belinda Bencic during their first round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne, Australia on Monday.

major to break a Grand Slam title drought dating back to 2008.

Bencic, who had never taken a set off Venus in four previous matches and had lost to Serena in the first round last year, had other

"I think I had a little bit too much respect, played a little bit careful and safe," Bencic said of her four previous losses to Venus. "This time I really tried to come out and

Bencic saved five break points in the eighth game before a rain delay caused an almost half-hour suspension of play as the roof was closed on Rod Laver Arena. She returned on a roll, winning the next six points to clinch the first set, and then dominated the second.

Venus had 26 unforced errors and 22 winners, and said she didn't get the luck of the draw by having to play somebody who has been ranked as high as No. 7.

"I don't think I played a bad match. She just played above and beyond," Williams said. "I just have to give her credit for that."

The 20-year-old Bencic, who was born a couple of months after the last time there was no Williams in the second round at the Australian Open (1997), hit 32 winners, had 12 unforced errors and converted five of 11 break-point chances.

She credited playing with Roger Federer at the Hopman Cup where they teamed up to win for Switzerland — with helping her recent improvement. Having Federer's parents supporting her in the crowd also helped.

Stephens was the first American to falter, losing 2-6, 7-6 (2), 6-2 to No. 34-ranked Zhang Shuai to extend her losing streak since the U.S. Open to eight matches.

"Tennis is definitely a roller coaster," said the 13th-seeded Stephens, who was broken while serving for the match in the second set. "But I have learned to just not panic. It will be OK."

It wasn't OK for the 10th-seeded Vandeweghe, a semifinalist in Melbourne and at the U.S. Open last year, who was feeling sick and frustrated in a 7-6 (4), 6-2 loss to Timea Babos.

She yelled an obscenity late in the second set, and then got a time violation for waiting too long for a banana to be brought to the

court between sets, earning a point penalty.

"I was just trying to wait for what I asked for to come and the chair umpire deemed that it wasn't a good enough reason," she said.

CiCi Bellis, Sofia Kenin — who lost to No. 12 Julia Goerges, now on a 15-match winning streak -Alison Riske, Taylor Townsend and Jennifer Brady all lost before Nicole Gibbs beat Viktoriya Tomova 6-1, 6-1 to end the streak of eight losses for the U.S. women.

Irina Falconi lost 6-1, 6-1 to No. 23-seeded Daria Gavrilova in the night match, making it 1 for 9.

Yes we were talking about it in the locker room and some of them were ribbing me that I had to carry the flag for us," Gibbs said. "It was a tough day, and this is a tough sport. This isn't an indication of anything except we have a lot of depth and we had a bad day."

Sock, the highest ranked of the American men, lost 6-1, 7-6 (4), 5-7, 6-3 to Yuichi Sugita, while Isner lost to Australian journeyman Matt Ebden and qualifier Kevin King lost to No. 15 Jo-Wilfried

Ryan Harrison beat Dudi Sela in a sometimes heated five-setter in front of a partisan crowd and qualifier Mackenzie McDonald also bucked the trend for the Americans.

Not everyone found the going tough on a mild opening day in

NFL PLAYOFFS: Jaguars stun Steelers at home, Eagles hold off Falcons

Continued from 1B

going to try to stay up and keep it going."

Williams, who had a key interception on a floater to Diggs in the third quarter, arrived a tad early. A pass interference flag would stop the clock with about 5 seconds left, giving the Vikings a chance at a field goal.

Williams awkwardly whiffed on Diggs, taking out cornerback Ken Crawley as Diggs came down, tucked the ball in his right arm and stuck his left hand in the turf

If he stumbles there, maybe he gets caught and time runs out. But he kept his balance, his cool — and stayed in bounds — shooting toward the end zone like a sprinter coming out of the

His 61-yard touchdown catch was one of the NFL's all-time last-play stunners and it erased four decades of heartache for a franchise was victimized by Drew Pearson's original "Hail Mary" catch; Gary Anderson missing his only

field goal of the season in the NFC title game; Brett Favre throwing across his body for a game-destroying pick in another NFC championship contest; and Blair Walsh shanking a short field goal against Seattle.

While the echoed, Williams, the 42nd overall selection in last April's NFL draft, sat sobbing in front of his cubicle in the Saints' locker room.

"I'm going to take it upon myself," Williams said after composing himself for a stand-up performance in front of the assembled media, "to make sure nothing like this happens again to me." While the magical ending

in Minnesota dominated the playoff discussions, there were other notable calls in the divisional round: **EAGLES 15, FALCONS**

10 — Fly Eagles Fly.

With the wind and against

With Nick Foles engineering several long drives, Jake Elliott converting three field goals, and the defense getting stingy in the tightest spot, Philadelphia moved into the NFC championship

game with a 15-10 victory over the Atlanta Falcons on

Foles directed brilliant marches of 74 and 80 yards in the second half — one into the whipping wind, the other with it — and Elliott atoned for missing an extra point by converting from 53 yards at the end of the second quarter, 37 and 21 in the second half. Then the Eagles (14-3) held when Atlanta (11-7) got to the 9-yard line with a first down, and to the 2 on fourth

When Matt Ryan's final pass sailed over Julio Jones' head in the end zone, Philly could celebrate its first playoff victory since the 2008 season.

JAGUARS 45,
STEELERS 42 — The
Jacksonville Jaguars, yes those Jacksonville Jaguars, are heading to the AFC championship game.

Rookie running back Leonard Fournette ran for 109 yards and three touchdowns, Blake Bortles added 214 yards passing and a vital fourth-quarter score as the relentless Jaguars stunned the Pittsburgh Steelers 45-42

The third-seeded Jaguars (12-6) will face top-seeded New England next week in Foxborough, Massachusetts after jumping on Pittsburgh early, then holding on late. Jacksonville raced to a 21-point lead, fended off a Steelers rally and responded every time Pittsburgh (13-4) challenged.

Ben Roethlisberger threw for 469 yards and set a franchise record with five touchdown passes, but was also intercepted once and had a fumble returned for a score. All-Pro Antonio Brown caught seven passes for 132 yards and two touchdowns in his return from a left calf injury. Le'Veon Bell had 155 yards of total offense and two scores.

But Pittsburgh's vaunted "Killer Bs" couldn't keep pace with Jacksonville, one of four NFL franchises to never make the Super Bowl.

Twice Pittsburgh had fourth-and-1 in Jacksonville territory. Twice it did something other than have the 6-foot-5 Roethlisberger sneak. The Steelers ran wide in the first quarter and Bell

was stuffed for a 4-yard loss. The Jaguars responded immediately by going 75 yards in 11 plays, the final one a 4-yard sprint by T.J. Yeldon that put them up The Steelers were down a

touchdown early in the fourth quarter and had fourth-andinches at the Jacksonville 39. Roethlisberger checked at the line of scrimmage, faked a handoff to Bell and instead threw incomplete to diving rookie JuJu Smith-Schuster. **PATRIOTS 35, TITANS** 14 — Tom Brady passed for

three touchdowns and 337 yards, and New England cruised past Tennessee 35-14 on Saturday night to advance to their seventh consecutive conference title game. New England (14-3) will

host the winner of Sunday's divisional matchup between Jacksonville and Pittsburgh. It was Brady's 10th career

postseason game with at least three TD tosses, moving him past Joe Montana for the most in NFL history. James White caught a touchdown pass and ran for another, and Danny Amendola had 11 catches for 112 yards.

New England's victory came on the heels of a week filled with turmoil following reports of discord involving Brady, coach Bill Belichick and team owner Robert

None of that showed on the field Saturday.

"I've been around long enough," Brady said. "So, 18 years, there's so many nice things said about me. It just goes with the territory." The Titans (10-8) took

an early 7-0 lead, but New England scored 35 straight points to take control. Marcus Mariota

completed 22 of 37 passes for 254 yards and two touchdowns, but was under duress for most of the second half. He was sacked eight times, a Patriots playoff record. New England also held

Derrick Henry to just 28 yards rushing on 12 carries.

The Titans came back from an 18-point deficit in the second half to beat the Chiefs 22-21 in the wildcard round last week — the largest comeback on the road in the Super Bowl era. But the Patriots didn't give them a chance for an encore.

IONESCU: Averaging a stellar 19.2 points, 7.3 rebounds, 7.2 assists per game this season

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before they were ousted by top-seeded UConn.

Ionescu, who was named Pac-12 Freshman of the Year, averaged 14.6 points, 6.6 rebounds and 5.5 assists last season. So far this season she's averaging 19.2 points, 7.3 rebounds and 7.2 assists.

But while all her offensive numbers have gone up, she says she's been focusing on defense

"I think everyone has to take and extra step in that defensively. direction. think that's what's going to separate us from being an

OK team from a great team,' she said. Definitely it starts individually, and I've really tried to do that."

Nationwide, she's known for those eight career triple-doubles. Ionescu hit the mark just 48 games into her college career when she had 24 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists against Pac-12 rival Washington on Dec. 31. She broke the previous record held by both Penn State's Suzi McConnell (1985-88) and St. Mary's Louella Tomlinson (2008-

Ionescu was a standout at Miramonte High School in Orinda, California, where she averaged 25.3 points, 8.8 assists, 7.6 rebounds and 4.5 steals and helped lead her team to a 32-1 record her senior season.

Considered one of the top prospects in the nation, she hung back while her peers across the nation committed. Signing day came and went while Ionescu took a thoughtful approach.

"I continued to wait and I watched the Pac-12 and some of the teams I was considering, what their coaches were telling me and how it was different or similar to how they were performing.

And I just decided the day before summer school started that this was the right fit for me, and it was," she said.

She announced her arrival in Eugene with no fanfare. She just showed up one day and told coach Kelly Graves she was in.

Graves joked that Ionescu was like Lenny Dykstra, the former Major League Baseball player: "She sets the table.

"She's smart, man, I'll tell you," Graves said. "She knows when we need her. She knows what big games are about. She always seems

to step up and play her best in those moments.'

Ionescu — who says she personally admires John Stockton — is always quick to point to her teammates, including fellow sophomore Ruthy Hebard, last season's top scorer, and fellow guard Maite Cazorla.

Arizona State coach Charli Turner Thorne called the Ionescu and Cazorla "arguably the best backcourt in the country."

Ionescu said she's getting a little more attention this season from opposing teams, especially in the Pac-12

play where teams are more

familiar with her, but she appreciates the challenge.
"You really have to

adjust to what teams throw at you, because they know your plays, they know your personnel. So I think that makes it difficult. You have to fight adversity in the Pac-12. They might take away your strength and you have to play to your weaknesses and perform every night or you're gonna get beat.

"That's what I because it really tests me. Players take away my shot, or something, and I have to figure out a different way to score or help my team."

Local slate PREP BOYS BASKETBALL

DeSales (WA) at Mac-Hi, 7 p.m. La Grande at Hermiston, 7:30 p.m. Stanfield at Riverside, 7:30 p.m. lone at Mitchell/Spray, 7:30 p.m. **Thursday** Heppner at Culver, 4:30 p.m.

Pendleton at Hood River, 7 p.m.

Friday
The Dalles at Herniston, 7 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Weston-McEwen, 7 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Weston-McEwen, 7 p.m.
Nyssa at Umatilla, 7:30 p.m. Nyssa at Orifiatina, 7-30 p.m. Vale at Riverside, 7:30 p.m. Burns at Irrigon, 7:30 p.m. Ione at Condon/Wheeler, 7:30 p.m. Ione at Condon/Wheeler, 7:30 p.m. Echo at Cove, 7:30 p.m. Pine Eagle at Helix, 7:30 p.m.

PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL

Tuesday
La Grande at Hermiston, 5:45 p.m.
DeSales (WA) at Mac-Hi, 6 p.m. Stanfield at Riverside, 6 p.m. Ione at Mitchell/Spray, 6 p.m. Pendleton at Baker, 7 p.m. Weston-McEwen at Waitsburg (WA), 7:30 p.m Thursday
Heppner at Culver, 6 p.m.
Hood River at Pendleton, 7 p.m.

Friday Pine Eagle at Helix, 5 p.m. Burns at Irrigon, 6 p.m. Vale at Riverside, 6 p.m. Nyssa at Umatilla, 6 p.m. Ione at Condon/Wheeler, 6 p.m Arlington at Mitchell/Spray, 6 p.m Joseph at Nixyaawii, 6 p.m.

Scho at Cove, 6 p.m. Hermiston at The Dalles, 7 p.m. Pilot Rock at Weston-McEwen, 7:30 p.m. PREP WRESTLING Tuesday Irrigon at Riverside

Wednesday Pendleton at Hood River, TBD Hermiston at The Dalles, TBD **Thursday** Mac-Hi at Baker, 5 p.m.

Friday Heppner at Grant Union Tournament Echo at Padilla Invite (ID) Hermiston at Liberty Invitational

PREP SWIMMING Pendleton, Hermiston at Hood River

COLLEGE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Friday EOU at Corban, 7:30 p.m. Saturday
BMCC at Walla Walla CC, 4 p.m.
EOU at Northwest Christian, 7:30 p.m.

COLLEGE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL Friday EOU at Corban, 5:30 p.m. **Saturday** BMCC at Walla Walla CC, 2 p.m.

COLLEGE WRESTLING Saturday EOU at. Warner Pacific/Embry-Riddle, 1 p.m. **Prep Standings**

Through Jan. 14 PREP BOYS BASKETBALL 5A COLUMBIA RIVER CONFERENCE **Lg Ovr PF PA Rnk**0-0 7-6 682 668 1 0-0 7-6 782 772 20 0-0 5-9 805 827 33 The Dalles Hood River Hermiston 0-0 4-9 752 807 4A GREATER OREGON LEAGUE | La Grande | La G

Lg Ovr PF PA Rnk 2-0 10-4 722 711 13

9-6 792 743 24 13-2 941 657 18 13-4 1013 716 15 Irrigon Umatilla Riverside 7-8 692 728 2A COLUMBIA BASIN CONFERENCE **Lg Ovr PF PA Rnk** 2-0 7-6 665 686 13 1-0 10-6 925 768 11 Heppner Pilot Rock 8-9 810 984 0-1 5-11 810 907 0-2 4-14 773 979 Weston-McE.

TA BIG SKY CONFERENCE

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Powder Valley Joseph Wallowa 3-3 8-7 678 699 3-3 6-11 838 940 3-3 5-10 680 802 0-6 3-10 406 698 0-6 1-15 492 869 PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL **5A COLUMBIA RIVER CONFERENCE**

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SCOREBOARD 2-1 5-9 492 598 1-1 7-7 600 532 0-2 11-4 624 450 Riverside 468 717 2A COLUMBIA BASIN CONFERENCE **Lg Ovr** 2-0 11-5 1-0 9-6 1-1 9-4 **PS PA Rnk**651 570 18
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665 558 21 Weston-McE Heppner Pilot Rock 0-1 10-6 699 565 2-13 496 777 1A BIG SKY LEAGUE PS PA Rnk South Wasco 11-3 692 483 7-6 536 547 6-7 518 511 Dufur Horizon Christ.

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Lg Ovr PS PA Rnk
6-0 15-0 1121 418 3
5-1 15-1 815 536 2
5-1 11-2 668 412 4
3-3 9-7 684 669 17 Nixyaawii Powder Valley Joseph Helix Cove Wallowa 6-9 513 593 2-4 4-11 1-5 6-11 0-6 2-11 604 719 684 769 306 592

Football NFL CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

Sunday Jacksonville at New England, Noon (CBS) Minnesota at Philadelphia, 3:40 p.m. (FOX)

Basketball **Atlantic Division**

w L Pct GB 10 .773 13 .690 20 .500 24 .455

Brooklyn To Southeast Division W 28 .364 L Pct GB 19 .568 25 .405 31 .279 31 .279 Washington 25 17 12 12 13 13 **Central Division** L Pct GB w 17 .604 — 20 .545 2½ 20 .535 3 20 .524 3½ 27 .386 9½ Cleveland Indiana Milwaukee Detroit 23 22 17

WESTERN CONFERENCE **L Pct GB**11 .732 —
16 .644 3
20 .524 8½ Houston San Antonio New Orleans Dallas 15 29 .341 161/2 28 .333 161/2 L Pct GB Minnesota 16 .644 20 .545 4½ Oklahoma City Portland 21 .512 Denver Utah 21 .512 26 .395

Pct GB Golden State 36 21 9 .800 — L.A. Clippers 28 .364 28 .349 L.A. Lakers Monday's Games

Charlotte 118, Detroit 107
Philadelphia 117, Toronto 111
Milwaukee 104, Washington
Atlanta 102, San Antonio 99
New York 119, Brooklyn 104
Chicago 119, Miami 111 Memphis 123, L.A. Lakers 114 Oklahoma City 95, Sacramento 88 Golden State 118, Cleveland 108 Indiana 109, Utah 94 Houston at L.A. Clippers, late finish Tuesday's Games Minnesota at Orlando, 4 p.m. New Orleans at Boston, 4:30 p.m. Dallas at Denver, 6 p.m. Phoenix at Portland, 7 p.m.

NCAA Men's Basketball Top 25 Schedule Monday No. 5 Duke 83, No. 25 Miami 75

Boston College 81, Florida State 75 No. 10 Kansas 71, No. 6 West Virginia 66 Tuesday
No. 12 Cincinnati at UCF, 4 p.m. (CBSSN)
No. 20 Clemson at No. 15 North Carolina,

4 p.m. Wisconsin at No. 3 Purdue, 4 p.m. (ESPN) No. 18 Kentucky at South Carolina, 6 p.m. (ESPN) No. 4 Oklahoma at Kansas State, 6 p.m. (ESPNU)

NCAA Women's Basketball Top 25 Schedule
Monday
No. 1 UConn 75, No. 9 Texas 71
No. 25 Green Bay 60, IUPUI 34

Tuesday Indiana at No. 14 Maryland, 4 p.m

No. 19 Michigan at No. 8 Ohio St., 4 p.m No. 20 Iowa at Nebraska, 5 p.m. Hockey

Monday's Games Dallas 3, Boston 2, OT

Colorado 3, Anaheim 1 San Jose 4, Los Angeles 1 N.Y. Islanders 5, Montreal 4, OT Tuesday's Games

St. Louis at Toronto, 4 p.m. St. Louis at Toronto, 4 p.m. New Jersey at N.Y. Islanders, 4 p.m. Philadelphia at N.Y. Rangers, 4 p.m. Dallas at Detroit, 4:30 p.m. Vegas at Nashville, 5 p.m. San Jose at Arizona, 6 p.m